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The Tree of Gernika: Political Poetics of Rootedness and Belonging

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Human places become vividly real through dramatization.

(Tuan 2005 [1977]: 178)

Legitimation of *present* in *past* is a recurrent political practice.[1] Past confirms that the group identities and territories to which they pertain have stable roots, often stretching towards the Creation, and, implicitly, rights conferred by a transcendental being. Starting with an apocalyptic image, this chapter outlines some of the historical and anthropological aspects of a political device par excellence, the Tree of Gernika, or *Gernikako Arbola,* as it is known in Euskara.[2] Its eventful longevity, intrinsic qualities as a particular nonhuman yet anthropomorphic being and the breadth of its presence in cultural processes across time and space suggest that it *listens* and *speaks* in different capacities (Figure 4.1). Starting from the town of Gernika, this arboreal communication, which fashioned its *genius loci,* branched out into a series of wider phenomena, most notably Basque nationalism. The chapter attempts to work with this unavoidable subject largely told through the story of the Tree, but I must admit my awareness of the simplifications contained in any such brief account.[3]

On Monday, 26 April 1937, thousands of Gernika residents came out for a market day. The bells from the nearby church sounded an alarm at 4:30 p.m. What transpired in the town for the next three and a half hours left a deep mark in world history (*Manchester Guardian* 1937; Steer 1937). The aircraft of the German Condor Legion 'machine-gunned the fleeing population' (Lannon 2002: 54) and completely eviscerated the town centre. Eyewitness accounts of two British journalists drew considerable attention to the horrors of this event. Noel Monks, the first journalist to reach Gernika, recalled: 'There were flames and smoke and grit, and the smell of burning human flesh was nauseating. Houses were collapsing into the inferno' (1955: 97). The day after the attack, George L. Steer wrote in Bilbao for the *London Times* that the object was 'seemingly the demoralization of the civil population and the destruction of the cradle of the Basque race'. The agony inflicted upon this town has been famously depicted by Picasso, whose portrait of the painful event became

Figure 4.1 Glass ceiling in Casa de Juntas (Assembly House), Gernika, courtesy of Jordi Payà, 2011-CC BY-SA 2.0.

the main image associated with the word *Guernica* worldwide. As a sort of 'modernist critique' of a violent modern age, the dismembered and scattered body parts on Picasso's canvas echo the disintegration of place. Franco denied his involvement in the destruction, yet it was widely understood to be an execution of his political goals (Alvarez-Piner 2005: 86; Lecours 2007: 71). The reports note how the air raid disregarded 'a small munitions factory' outside the town (Monks 1955: 97), which implies that the reasons for the bombing may not be found in 'strategic warfare', but rather in Gernika as 'a space of great symbolic significance' (Lecours 2007: 71). To understand how Basque identity came to be epitomized by this small town, let us now turn towards the central motif of this chapter, a story told through the many lives of one oak tree.

The medieval economic, political and legal existence of the Basque traditional regions was governed by the institution of *fueros*—'collections of local laws and customs' (Heiberg 1989: 20).[4] While the Castilian and later Spanish royalty granted these rights to many parts of their kingdom, Basque *fueros* have been locally and traditionally understood as 'charters of liberty' (Strong 1893: 317–18) because, unlike in other regions, they survived until the nineteenth century and the Carlist Wars in Spain (Peers 1936: 531) and the end of the eighteenth century in France (Douglass and Bilbao 2005: 63). It was Juan I, the Castilian king, who took an oath in Gernika that 'he and his successors would maintain the "fueros, customs, franchises and liberties" of the land' (Strong 1893: 326). In 1476 and 1483, the same loyalty to Gernika was promised by Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, the pair notable for commencing the unification of Spain but also for the sponsorship of Columbus and the expulsions and conversions of Jews and Muslims. Their pledge was given under a particular tree in Gernika, an oak tree that was the historical meeting place of the town elders (Raento and Watson 2000: 711).

So why did this particular tree stand out amongst other trees? There had been meeting-oaks in various towns, but as the sessions in Gernika were longest, representatives were gradually sent there from other towns, with 'trumpets sounded and bonfires lit on the nearby mountaintops' (Kurlansky 1999: 86).[5] Also, this oak tree distinguished itself mostly because it was the locus of ceremonial confirmation of the *fueros* by royalty, which signified regional liberties and autonomy to a certain extent. *The Royal Audience,* a seventeenth-century painting by Francisco de Mendieta, depicts King Ferdinand giving an oath before Gernikako Arbola in 1476 (Quintela 2004: 38). For Basques, the recognition of *fueros* implied several exemptions. They were not subject to arbitrary arrest, use of torture, mandatory army service or taxation. In the nineteenth century, this tax exemption was seen as an important element to defend from the liberals in the Carlist Wars who sought to abolish that particular legal system (Heiberg 1989: 23; Raento and Watson 2000: 712). W. T. Strong (1893: 327) mentioned that the reaction to the imposition of taxes in 1804 by Manuel de Godoy, the Spanish Prime Minister of the time, was the burning of the tax stamps 'by the common hangman under the tree of Guernica'. It was really the case of one

legal document being refuted by another. *Fueros* have remained highly symbolic of Basque rights and liberties that centred nationalist programmes (Heiberg 1989: 20). In these demands, Gernika and the Tree have been used as the emblem of Basque historic liberties, and they attained an aura of sacredness (Trembath 2007: 3). At the outset of the nineteenth century, English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote 'The Oak of Guernica' (1815: 250) referencing its social and legal role:

> OAK of Guernica! Tree of holier power
> Than that which in Dodona did enshrine
> (So faith too fondly deemed) a voice divine
> Heard from the depths of its aerial bower—
> How canst thou flourish at this blighting hour?
>
> [. . .]
>
> Those lofty-minded Lawgivers shall meet,
> Peasant and lord, in their appointed seat,
> Guardians of Biscay's ancient liberty.

Romanticizing of medieval history is a common theme to many nationalist productions. What this chapter explores is the interaction of landscape with history, the agentive quality of nonhumans in proliferations of identity. The poetics of identity politics in the formation of places, as expressed through language, images and a nonhuman entity, provide a fertile ground for the analysis of Basque history. In the words of Raento and Watson (2000: 721), such poetics are perpetuated by 'a living organism' in 'the bringing together of past and present in the same space and the same time'. This impregnation of the tree with political meaning, indeed an equation of the local laws and political ambitions with the miraculous eternal Tree is a social construct, which reminds us of Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the judgement of taste. It is a lived abstraction which reinvents the social norms. It classifies, and it classifies the classifiers as those who are legitimized by it, which corresponds to Anderson's (2006 [1983]: 6) definition of nations as communities imagined 'both inherently limited and sovereign'. In Wordsworth's poem, the Tree of Gernika is simultaneously an instrument of the gods (holy, divine) and society (lawgiver, guardian of liberty). These two characteristics legitimize each other. Seen as an image of a direct connection, through ancestors to the very Creation, the age of a tree perhaps best determines its significance to humans (Jones and Cloke 2002: 33). When the 300-year-old tree died in 1860, it was housed in a 'temple', and a new one was planted with the use of acorns from what became known as the 'old Tree'. The 'Father Tree' was supposedly from the fourteenth century. In 2004, after 144 years of political life, the death of the third tree was officially mourned, but not before it was made sure that its acorns would produce further replications (Kurlansky 1999: 161; BBC News 2004; Nash 2004). The tree does not die to be substituted by another, nor does the community.

Rather, the tree is always the same Tree, the community always the same Community and the values, laws, customs and liberties reflect their perdurable nature. They simply extend their existence through regeneration. In the words of the Basque journalist Gorka Landaburu: 'The tree has died, long live the tree' (Nash 2004: 1).

'Gernikako Arbola', frequently called the 'Basque hymn', a song from 1853 by José María Iparraguirre, 'a Carlist volunteer in the first war at the age of thirteen' (Kurlansky 1999: 161), which eventually got him arrested and expelled from the Basque Country, further imbued the tree with human, social, metaphysical and perennial nature. Aulestia (1981: 48) notes that the song violates syntax in the first line but compensates with direct language and emotional content. The Tree is spoken to and has the ability to answer, it is 'planted by God', its corporeal 'fresh veins' will live 'now and forever', but it is also equated with the destiny of the community: 'If you fall we will perish easily.' However, there is an intelligent catch: the Tree never really falls. In fact, the seeds of Gernikako Arbola have been planted throughout the Basque diaspora, making it a 'focal point of this international allegiance' (Raento and Watson 2000: 719). Basque life, a thoroughly imagined yet palpable process, is symbolically and politically ensured through the association with a tree. It can exist as *the* Tree across time and space. 'Objects anchor time,' Tuan noted (2005 [1977]: 187), but, as we see here, it is rather that they invite a multiplicity of temporal and spatial connections.

Gernikako Arbola is 'full of agency', not least because the roles 'embedded into it' semiautonomously enter a spectacle of communication with humans—a spectacle that creates bilateral imprints. 'Embedded' is in quotation marks because the Tree is not a mere tabula rasa or a palimpsest, but a complex and versatile actor even when apparently inscribed with meaning. Its roles are played out within social networks and are intricately woven into the lives of humans, which makes segregated research of 'subjects' and 'objects' implausible. Marx (1973 [1939]: 265) held that society, rather than consisting of individuals (or actors in our case), expresses the sum of their interrelations. So, perhaps I can deflect from his famous sentence, as Penny Dransart insightfully suggested in our personal correspondence:

> [Trees] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx 2008 [1852]: 15).

Like 'men', Gernikako Arbola is not in a casual but rather a *causal* relationship with other actors in the society. The question of what the Tree *is* cannot be answered without a morphology of its relationships. Finding elements of the social and *social agency* is exactly that, a matter of looking into the positions within these interrelations (Gell 1998: 121–6).[6] Gell (1998: 19–23) downgrades this causal quality of 'things' to the mere reflection of the vicinity of another, true agent. Agency seems to always depend on its origins in human conceptualization. Gell accepts only primary and

secondary agents, both of which are inescapably linked with intention. The former hold intention; they are 'intentional beings'. This allows them a strong (primary) grip on agency. Secondary agents serve themselves to the distributed agency of these 'intentional beings', only to emanate it back to them. Gell offers a complex argument, but, like the trees that he mentions in passing (Gell 1998: 121–2), it ultimately rests upon human intention. All nonhumans, whether nonliving or biologically alive, can only be animated; they are given symbolic errands but remain separate categories, forever second in line to the social throne.

Nonhumans are always social, or at least they are as soon as we imagine them. Of something outside of what we know, we simply cannot speak. In fact, to stretch this argument further, Gernikako Arbola may only nominally be distinguished as 'nonhuman'. The term offers itself as a heuristic device to think of the complications to the 'obvious' separations. We could say that what is imagined is produced and what is produced imagines. So when we, nominally human, imagine in some way that which already exists outside of us, are we not imagining ourselves through this reiterative process? Are we not really *made* of those 'nonhumans'? This, along with a bulk of historical infrastructure, could be the most basic explanation of how Gernikako Arbola manages to equal Gernika, Javier from Bilbao or any sense of the Self.

Moving away from the structuralists, Bourdieu (1990b: 9–12) wanted to reintroduce social agents. His notion of *habitus* speaks to the practices and strategies, dispositions based on experience, which are open for variation, or improvisation without being necessarily tied into rational decision making. Bourdieu rather spoke of 'cognition without consciousness, intentionality without intention' (Bourdieu 1990b: 12). When a particular landscape belongs to the *habitus*-producing structure of one community (Bourdieu 1984, 1990a), then the community, which belongs to the same structure, also produces the *habitus* of the landscape. The social dispositions of landscape are equally affected. This idea of 'full circle impact' has also been discussed within cultural ecology (Steward 1955; Sutton and Anderson 2010) in terms of interdependent processes. Such indivisibilities suggest that research of cultural identities should be a holistic study that includes habitat, but also the practices and narratives pertaining to it. Latour complicates this Bourdieusian argument of 'structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu 1990a: 53) by suggesting that we acknowledge varieties and ambiguities in action as 'a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled' (Latour 2005: 44). Rather than *objects* and *subjects,* to bridge this divide, he speaks of humans and nonhumans through their relationships (Latour 2005: 72) and *actants* instead of anthropomorphic *actors,* to imply all which 'acts or shifts action' (Akrich and Latour 1992: 259; Latour 2004: 75). In what he termed Actor-Network Theory, nonhumans have an active role and are not 'the hapless bearers of symbolic projection' (Latour 2005: 10). Agency is dispersed in the networks rather than originating from a specific source. That the actors in this network are 'possessed by the action', as Ingold (2011: 214) suggested, should not imply a disregard for the useful

analytical concept of agency as mere 'magical mind-dust'. Agency is not what sets into activity, as some spiritual or intellectual force behind the curtain, but the very quality of inducing action. Perhaps the puzzling allure of the Basque Tree–centred relationships stems from their anomalous manifestation in the alienation into well-defined categories that structure the lives we live.

Nationalizing the Tree

> As one of the interviewed moderate nationalists cynically remarked in 1995, referring to the importance addressed to, and to the conversation concerning, Gernika: 'Today, it is not possible to be Basque without doing your árbol laboral, without spending some time under the Tree, even if it was only ten minutes per year.'
>
> (Raento and Watson 2000: 730)

Real, not imagined, lives were subjected to the oppression of nation-state homogenization in Spain. Images of Basque culture threatened with disappearance were amplified to the extent of myth—grounds for yet another nationalism. First to formulate this sentiment were troubadour poets like Iparraguirre and Arrese Beitia who established the main elements for a later, more systematic approach (Aulestia 1981: 48). The Basque fable featuring an anthropomorphic tree was further developed to include a moral message of uncanny political resistance after Gernikako Arbola survived the attack in 1937. News reports informed about the miraculously untouched church, parliament and the Sacred Tree, 'the dried old stump of 600 years and the new shoots of this century' (Steer 1937; Monks 1955: 97), thereby solidifying the legend of Gernika[7] and 'creating a myth that they can never be eliminated' (Totoricagüena 2004: 40).

Shortly after the annihilation of Gernika, survivors had gathered under their Venerable Oak (Kurlansky 1999: 204). The *real* and the *imagined* place of safety intertwined at that moment into a singular multilayered experience. Such palpable events fed into collective memory of the Basque Country, argued Lecours (2007: 70). History is thus perceived both in relation to human eyewitness experiences and the transgenerational life of the Tree to which they contribute. Pérez-Agote (2006: xxii) argued that Franco's regime aided the 'radicalization of [Basque] nationalist consciousness' through its persecutions of Basque culture. Euskara, the Basque language, was declining because it was not used in schools or any other public spaces. Even personal names were rewritten in registries and on tombstones (Da Silva 1975: 230; Raento and Watson 2000: 725). The Carlist Wars had already abolished the *fueros* (Peers 1936: 531), which led Sabino Arana, the fin de siècle father of so-called proper Basque nationalism, to promote sovereignty as 'an innate attribute of Basques' symbolized by Gernikako Arbola (Heiberg 1989: 55).

Lecours (2007: 72–82) noted that the idea of the Basque nation was legitimized in the resistance to the dictatorship, but also that radical nationalism and its violence have 'outlived the political and institutional circumstances that led to its birth'. Nationalism fashioned in opposition to another nationalism is a frequent occurrence. This oxymoronic posttraumatic disorder is not just Basque but also Israeli, Bosnian and Kosovar. The threat of disappearance seems to be most easily constructed into the politics of one dominant identity.

Ritual, especially commemorative ceremony, is nearly always a closed form, a repetitive performance of utterances, postures and gestures, which give rhythm to social memory (Connerton 1989: 58–61). When José Antonio Aguirre was elected the first *lehendakari,* leader of the Basque government, in October 1936 (De Meneses 2001: 122; Mees 2003: 20), he made an oath under Gernikako Arbola (Kurlansky 1999: 189):

> Humble before God
> Standing on Basque soil
> In remembrance of Basque ancestors
> Under the tree of Guernica, I swear
> to faithfully fulfill my commission.

The same pledge at the same place was given by Garaikoetxea, the next *lehendakari,* in 1980. He reclaimed Gernika, the legendary Tree, and Euskara, the language he was not taught in Franco's Spain, as Basque national symbols par excellence (Kurlansky 1999: 275–6). The ritualized performance of the pledge seems to be unavoidable in political ceremonies today, even though different programmes are legitimized through slight changes in the wording. So, Paxti Lopez, who is the first socialist *lehendakari,* omitted the word 'God' in his address under the Tree and swore upon the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country rather than the Bible (Euronews 2009). Nevertheless, the centrality of the Tree in the emotional geography of the Basques was both confirmed and exploited, as politicians continue to be elected upon the presumption that 'Gernika's identity remained rooted in a mythological past' (Raento and Watson 2000: 714).[8] The power of a single nonhuman entity to the feelings of belonging has branched out onto wider levels of abstraction. As Tuan (2005 [1977]: 150) noted, 'Cosmic views can be adjusted to suit new circumstances.' Yet, the very fact that the main elements of the legendary oath before the Tree are ritually reenacted (Connerton 1989: 61) makes them successful, not so much as mnemonic devices, but rather as political devices infiltrated into the mnemonic power of ritual.

Ritual recitations of myths are often performed by specialists of some kind (Goody 2010: 55). In its role as a myth, which has been adapted to a specific age, Gernikako Arbola is tied to a *lehendakari* as a particular sort of secular shaman. The hermeneutic role of a *lehendakari* is limited by networks of agencies. Shorter (1989: 68) argued that myths, which articulate archetypal truths, are never completely lived.

They are rather felt as relevant by people in their daily lives. By imputing a certain agency to the Tree as an actor in the myth (a sort of 'social arrangement' that I previously described as full of nominal humans and nonhumans), I do not wish to exclude the human cognitive process of decision making, although the agency of the Tree is a disclaimer to its limitlessness. The Myth of the Tree is a reproduced disposition, which may adopt more layers or be completely rejected in particular group or individual experiences. However, as soon as any actor enters into a relationship with the Tree, there is a situation of at least two agentive entities of the social. To induce a division between the social and the nonsocial is, as Latour (2005: 47) says, possible 'precisely once the overall society disappears'.

Images of the Tree and oak leaf also continue to permeate Basque political and cultural arenas. The flag and the coat of arms of the Biscay province are adorned with depictions of the Tree and a wreath of oak leaves, which have also been used by nationalist parties and radical groups, as well as on Basque police badges (Mansvelt Beck 2005: 159). The same symbols are present in the coat of arms of the Basque Country, but also in posters, paintings and sculptures of the Basque diaspora (Totoricagüena 2004: 40). This omnipresence relies on the notion that the Tree somehow 'soaked up the complex social constructions' (Jones and Cloke 2002: 93) and it speaks for itself. Tourism is also feeding into these trademarks of *Euskaltasuna,* an actual word meaning 'Basqueness' or 'the quality of being Basque', according to the website of the North American Basque Organizations. Visitors are invited to '[l]earn about the importance and the symbolism of the Tree of Gernika' and '[s]tand in the place of a Lehendakari, swear the oath of office, and take home a commemorative souvenir scroll' (Gernika-Lumo Town Council n.d.). Merely to perform the ceremony and actually to understand what the performance signifies to those who live by it are two completely different experiences (Turner 1991 [1969]: 7). This invitation to the (presumed) international visitor to engage in a quick performance of history begins a parallel, yet a completely different life of the Tree. Executing performances and being habituated to them implies not only incommensurable relationships (Connerton 1989: 71) but also discrepant discourses. Heritage tourism operates through outsider appreciation at best and does not engender a sense of belonging and placedness.

A monument named 'My Father's House', referring to Gabriel Aresti's (1963) poem of the same title made famous by Basque nationalists, has been built near the Tree (Raento and Watson 2000: 721). Placing the 'Father tree' next to the 'Father's house', which will, the song proclaims, remain standing after everything is lost, extends the symbolic capital of the Tree as the embodiment of unbreakable kinship to the domain of exclusive memory. This juxtaposition is a political mnemonic technique. Remembering implies an associative process. New information is 'deposited' together with new images (Butler 1989: 19). However, the power of association is not exclusive to human agency. While Gernikako Arbola has proved useful to a proliferation of nationalist sentiment, it has taken on a life (or rather lives) of its own. It is an organic image that may, with or without the public performance associated with

it, speak to different, even conflicting claims. It has already exploded geographically. A monument's definitive meaning, what is inscribed in or out of it, is progressively difficult to control. Is the Tree socialist, nationalist, touristic? Which version of history does it uphold—Franco's version, the Basque nationalist version, a diasporic version or a more intimately human one? Why did the Condor Legion spare it after all? Wondering about the same question, Kurlansky (1999: 205) wrote: 'Maybe the Germans, not knowing Basque history, thought it was just a tree.'

The Nature of Nature

> But this is not just any tree. For one thing, it draws the entire landscape around it into a unique focus: in other words, by its presence it constitutes a particular place. The place was not there before the tree, but came into being with it.
>
> (Ingold 1993: 167)

How does *organic* become *political,* and why? It would be much easier to discuss the many positions of Gernikako Arbola in the forming of identities without the complications of nationalism—the imperative 'false consciousness'. Violence invested in identity politics favouring homogeneity acts to smooth out the multiplicity of meanings. How can the more subtle relationships with landscape, including those that are widely termed political, surface under such essentializing forces?

By relating the Basque example to research on *miyoomb* trees from southwest Congo (De Boeck 1998), Athapaskan and Tlingit glaciers (Cruikshank 2005) and my ethnographic research on Bosnian sacral geography, I would, if only briefly, like to look at another possible aspect in the appropriation of the Tree as the Basque political tool par excellence. An intricate relationship with the image and meaning of *miyoomb* trees as living shrines allows aLuund to 'replant' their sense of home in another space (De Boeck 1998: 26). Basqueness, as told through oak trees—and every oak *is* in theory a potential Gernikako Arbola—has secured the regeneration of Basque communities (or political programmes) wherever and whenever there is at least one acorn left. The basic formula in the 'legend of Gernika', the preservation of placedness through the symbolic lives of nonhuman beings, works similarly in De Boeck's example: 'What turns a space into a place for the aLuund of southwestern Congo is, literally, its rootedness in the past and its capacity to constitute, and conjure up, a living spatialized memory and link between past and present' (De Boeck 1998: 25). Thus, locality can always be reached anew through the growing of new trees, which are representational of the community, its past and the human bodies in multitudes of their 'biological and social' experiences. In the geographically wider Basque case, diasporic communities render *space* into concrete *place* by seeding the symbol into the soil, and one can 'travel the Americas from south to north by way of the Gernikako Arbola' (Raento and Watson 2000: 719).

The Basque Tree, much like *miyoomb* trees, is a listener and a speaker, with the ability to both embody processes of life and to 'perpetuate the ideal cultural order' (De Boeck 1998: 42). The world is both constituted and elucidated through the relationship with the landscape.

A combination of anthropomorphic and arboreal qualities of Gernikako Arbola suggests various kinship strategies, most of all the insistence on durability and continuation. Cruikshank (2005: 11) noticed that Tlingit and Athapaskan communities traditionally understood glaciers as intensely social spaces with characteristics normally attributed to persons, such as gender. Many toponyms in the sacral Bosnian geography are also gendered, reflecting their symbolic power. 'Maiden's Cave' (*Djevojačka Pećina*), a monumental crevice near the village of Brateljevići, is regularly visited by thousands of Muslim pilgrims who enter *Earth's womb* to pray for the soul of the legendary woman who was not afraid to enter and eventually die there. The spring called 'Male Water' (Muška Voda), a renowned aphrodisiac, is in close proximity to the cave.[9]

Basque community, traditionally Catholic and patriarchal, as well as the older natural archetypes are thus similarly reflected in the naming of the oldest stump as the 'Father tree'. Russel (1979: 223–4) argued from a folklorist perspective that the equation of tree with kinship lineage may be traced to the Neolithic and that the metaphor has been variously ritualized around the world since then. In her view, the archetypal tree 'is the kinship symbol par excellence, and since kinship has always been at the centre of social life in every society, it is natural to find a cosmic tree (kinship) at the centre of the cosmos (society), and we do indeed find cosmic trees in many societies' (Russel 1979: 228).

Sacred trees are often involved in communication with humans, which implies their agency in processes of listening and speaking. For example, enquirers heard replies from Prussian oak trees inhabited by gods, near which they held their religious and political assemblies (Chadwick 1900: 31–2). A parallel with the Gernikako Arbola is obvious—it is a place of political and religious congregation which imparts sacred knowledge. Its designation as the Venerable Oak might be a starting point for researchers of European 'pre-Christian' pantheons, which seem to have revolved around the agency of what Europeans now call 'nature'. Cruikshank's (2005: 10) argument that the 'Western material and cultural world' rejects the possibility of landscape being the listener is perhaps best denounced by one of the verses in Iparraguirre's national hymn after the Basques ask it to *live forever*:

> The tree answered
> that we should live carefully
> and in our hearts
> ask the Lord:
> We do not want wars
> [but] peace forever,
> to love here
> our fair laws.

The symbolic is communicated from and to the tree, but the content must be in a way 'confirmed' by its intrinsic organic qualities, as 'nature "pushes back" with its own vitality' (Jones and Cloke 2002: 6). Political and otherwise socialized poetics of organic nonhuman life act as a sort of human heuristic device in the very basic formation of identities.

But why would Basques relate to this specific species of tree? The use of oak-related imagery in Europe was abundant throughout its history. Oak leaf crowns were regularly used in Roman crowns as symbols of divine sanction because oak was sacred to Jupiter the thunder god, but they were also used in civic wreaths as a sign of military achievement (Riccardi 2000: 105–6). A thunder god is a pan-European deity, the only one in common to all the Indo-Germanic-speaking communities of the continent (Chadwick 1900: 42). The old oak sanctuary at Dodona was related to the thunder god Zeus, who was sometimes seen as a deity dwelling in a sacred oak (Cook 1903: 403). Chadwick (1900) also mentioned that Perkuno or Perkunas, the Prussian and Baltic thunder god, inhabited oaks, and his symbol was a perpetual oak-wood fire.[10] The establishment of a cognitive relationship between thunder, the 'thunderer' and large oaks seems almost logical. Wouldn't such a tree be first to attract thunder in an open space? These divine oak inhabitants, it may be argued, are just another conception of the agency of nonhumans that are so thoroughly examined in modern scholarship.

Across time and space, oaks have been understood as symbols of freedom, strength and refuge (Jones and Cloke 2002: 35). Although the stories contain some resemblances, Gernikako Arbola is markedly different from the Royal Oak, the tree in which King Charles II was supposedly hidden after the battle of Worcester (Scott 2011: 284), or the Charter Oak in Connecticut, where in 1662 the Colonial Charter was safeguarded from King James II according to the legend and which grew into a symbol of American liberties (Corrigan 2008). The Basque Tree has not only been featured in several important historical episodes rather than one, but was also socialized into the 'magical drama of human agency' (Kwon 2006: 102) and reworked into the process of constituting different places through the memorialization of an imagined temporal, moral and geographical stillness.

With the case of Bosnia, which, like Gernika, had experienced destruction and suppression of culture, alternative memory becomes embedded in narratives and landscape, as a way of distancing itself from official interpretations. Equating the Basque community and its values with the Tree and then imagining the Tree as miraculously perennial has developed through stages of local custom, political resistance, formation of nationalism and towards the many contemporary claims to the symbol. Observing that 'Gernika embodies various geographical, historical, and political scales of conflict,' Raento and Watson (2000: 708) considered another form of embodiment in relation to struggles against the state when they added that 'Gernika reflects competing interests within Basque nationalism.'

How does a tree sustain particular kinds of memory? Mnemonic methods are 'ways of organizing information to make it easier to remember, typically by using

codes, visual imagery or rhymes' (Foster 2009: 117). Some of the best known methods, like the *method of loci* and *mental mapping,* entail a possibility to remember particular events, people and stories through their association with place and correlating them to other places and one's own position in the world (Foster 2009: 123). This process of memory depends upon the repetitive inscription of bodies and nature into one another (Lovell 1998: 11) but may take the form of both remembering and memorialization feeding on remembrance, which makes landscaped memory apt to answer the changing circumstances of the lived present in the form of political claims inter alia.

In their analysis of trees as markers of 'changing places', Jones and Cloke (2002: 95–6) do not consider the elements of *active silence* and *symbolic mirroring* of human lives, which Gernikako Arbola exudes concomitantly. Combined, these two characteristics allow Gernika not only to change as place but also simultaneously to exist as more than one place. When I say *active silence,* I am implying that the agency of a tree is (perhaps frustratingly for some) stubborn in a particular kind of stillness. It doesn't side with any of its histories. This adds to its versatility as a symbol. Basso's (2007) account of silence in Western Apache culture is of a (human) response to unpredictability in social situations. Silence is not empty, but a form of communication. Gernikako Arbola's act of 'withholding' may be experienced as a hierarchical arrangement, discipline and punishment, a sign of respect, age, a lament over unfortunate circumstances, contemplation or reflection. It extends the minute of silence over the loss of Gernika lives but works altogether differently in another social situation.

But how is this idea of *active silence* different from 'simple passivity of objects' as a support for human symbolic projections? Firstly, even if imagined somehow detached from the world of humans, trees might only be considered silent in terms of human vocal and sign languages. The spatial and temporal presence of trees, some more than others, is powerful. They grow, rupture and affect soil, produce and reproduce. They make sounds turn, and grow towards water and sun. They suffer from hunger, thirst and sickness; they fall and die. They are independent of human action but have a mutually beneficial relationship with much of what is around them. Can we really assume that annual rings of trees, as a cross-species (human and nonhuman if you will) measurement of time, are symbolic projections? Or is dendrochronology just a matter of multiple reflexes? A tree reflects periods of rain and sun, a human reflects the tree, the tree reflects the human, the periods of sun and rain reflect the tree and so forth. Claiming agency for humans really implies a claim to the intentionality of action, yet intention on its own affects nothing outside of the given actor directly.

Trees are also a good start for the questioning of boundaries between activity and passivity. Passivity performs. It is a way of action, a modus operandi. It may accept or reject content, communication and intervention. Passivity as a decontextualized concept is not very informative, however. To say that subjects or objects, humans or nonhumans, are passive contains no information about the quality of

their existence. To what are they passive? What conditions their passivity? There is no more simplicity to the passivity of Gernikako Arbola than there is to the passivity of humans.

Clearly, there is an entanglement of people and trees. People are affected by trees as organic beings, symbols and objects, and trees are affected by people in much the same way. The first two effects of this reverse process should be rather self-explanatory, but how are trees affected by people as symbols? Rather than imputing them with some kind of appreciation for symbolism, it is clear that their lives with people are affected by symbolic anthropomorphic comparisons. The life of Gernikako Arbola is shaped by important instances of human–nonhuman encounters. Was not the pledge of Isabella under the Tree just an assembly of two symbolic living beings who are affected by and affecting the networks through which they operate?

An easy presumption would be that the whole story of agentive trees rests on vivid anthropomorphism, but a closer observation reveals that humans are just as often arboreomorphic in their mirroring of the many qualities and life stories of trees: 'Trees can construct places and vice versa' (Jones and Cloke 2002: 86). To ask who started this process of mutual affection would be similar to the pointless dilemma of what was first, a chicken or an egg.

Genius Loci

> A place is, therefore, a qualitative, 'total' phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationships, without losing its concrete nature out of sight.
>
> (Norberg-Shulz 1980: 7)

The idea of 'unchanging landscape' has been successfully dispelled, not least by anthropologists. We are now able to understand it as a 'cultural process' (Hirsch 1995: 23). Building upon Veena Das's notion of 'critical events', Frances Pine (2003: 281) concluded that 'moments of shifting ideologies must be taken into account when considering how meanings, land and personhood transform over time and, conversely, how core ideas remain consistent despite changes.' Gernikako Arbola defines the *genius loci* of Gernika, 'the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms with in his daily life' (Norberg-Shulz 1980: 5), the spirit of place which encapsulates both desirable and undesirable history and speaks from the complex intersection of the lived and the imagined. Rendered as the human mirror, synchronically and diachronically, and socialized into a range of roles, from the legal document to the cathedral of pure *Basqueness,* from a kinship symbol to the stumbling block for one and a foundational pillar for another nation, from the shelter of the frightened to the tourist playground, from the call for freedom to the justification for violence, the Venerable Oak, once just a tree, grows with agency that transcends each of the particularities associated with it.

The ethos of Gernikako Arbola, however, has always remained political, from the medieval *fueros* to the contemporary Basque nationalist claims. It should be understood as a performed organic history, layers of which cannot otherwise be conveyed. The 'common oak' is the most frequent and versatile type of tree to enter the process of culture (Jones and Cloke 2002: 35). The Oak of Gernika engages dialectically with ideological processes within its reach. It sustains Gernika as the place of destruction but also contradicts it, as it embodies survival, life and liberty. Raento and Watson (2000) observe that there have been at least two different places *Guernica* and *Gernika* imagined side by side. There are political attempts to merge them into a single symbolic place, which the request to move Picasso's painting from Madrid to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao also implies (Lecours 2007: 71). The masterpiece reminds of a dreadful event but, curiously, invites hope through light bulbs that shine upon the shattered town. Was it in rootedness and regeneration that Picasso predicted a cultural reconstruction? It would have been more appropriate, it seems to me, to simply paint an oak tree as the organic image which encapsulates the different dimensions of Basque history, but '[w]e make time and place, just as we are made by them' (Bender 2001: 4) and the painting-tree-town-nation signified by Gernika operates under many, if sometimes contradictory, meanings.

Notes

1. For a wide-ranging analysis of social memory, see Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989).
2. I have decided to use the Basque spelling *Gernika,* rather than the Spanish *Guernica* in this chapter. It is the official name of the town, but a variation in the spelling of this toponym is also pertinent to the existing identity politics. Note that Raento and Watson (2000: 709, 710) use *Gernika* 'as a means of distancing the place from the painting [by Picasso]'.
3. I would like to express my gratitude to Vanja Hamzić, whose readings and comments have, so many times, been detailed and constructive. I also thank Sari Wastell for introducing me to Gernikako Arbola during her fieldwork in the Bosnian town of Stolac, and Penny Dransart for her insightful editing. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer. Shortcomings of this chapter are solely mine.
4. The seven traditional regions include Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba (which form the Basque Autonomous Community or the 'historical territories'), Navarra/Nafarroa, and Labourd, Basse Navarre and Soule in France (Douglass and Bilbao 2005: 14, 62; Facaros and Pauls 2012: 24). *Fueros* are also known as *foruak* in Basque and *fors* in French.
5. For a discussion of dendrolatry in a wider context, other important Basque trees and a map with the most famous examples, see Julio C. Baroja's *Ritos i Mitos Equivocos* (1989: 339–88).

6. For an insightful discussion of these distinctions, see *Thinking through Things* (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007).
7. On the history of discussions about whether the news reports contributed to the 'legend of Guernica', see Herbert Routledge Southworth's *Guernica! Guernica! A Study of Journalism, Diplomacy, Propaganda and History* (1977) and Armin Paul Frank's *Off-canon Pleasures: A Case Study and a Perspective* (2011: 92–108).
8. In his very detailed analysis of *The Social Roots of Basque Nationalism* (2006), sociologist Alfonso Pérez-Agote succeeds in not mentioning either Guernica or its famous oak tree which are so central to the formation of historical and contemporary perception and self-perception of the Basque existence. A similar observation can be made with some other volumes which offer insights into the Spanish Civil War and Basque nationalism (Da Silva 1975; Ben-Ami 1991; De Meneses 2001; Seidman 2002; Ealham and Richards 2005). There is no Gernikako Arbola in these accounts.
9. This relates to my ongoing research and fieldwork in 2012–2013.
10. Chadwick (1900) explained that Perkuno is etymologically related to the Latin word *quercus,* while druid is related to the Greek word *druidēs,* both denoting oak. Druids, according to Pliny the Elder (c. AD 77–79) held 'nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and a tree on which it is growing, provided it is Valonia Oak'.

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